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SUBJECT: ALGERIA'S SA'ID BOUTEFLIKA -- A FRENCH MFA
PERSPECTIVE

REF: SECSTATE 125735

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathy Allegrone, Reasons 1.
4(b),(d).

11. (S/NF) The French have limited information about the private life, personal opinions, and political ambitions of Sa'id Bouteflika (reftel), according to French MFA Algeria Desk Officer Anne-Claire Legendre. Nonetheless, Legendre told poloff December 14 that, based on French sources and analysis, she believes Sa'id has begun to adopt an increasingly significant role in Algerian political life, culminating in his openly acknowledged role as campaign manager during the 2008 re-election of his brother, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. As campaign manager, Sa'id worked closely with leaders of the National Rally for Democracy (RND), Legendre reported; she described the group with which he collaborated as "secular technocrats and businessmen," and wondered whether this close association might indicate something about Sa'id's world view. Legendre further ventured that the Bouteflika brothers may be concealing their succession plans in order to build support among Algeria's elite, who remain suspicious of any attempts to "personalize" the presidency through the creation of a family dynasty. She also discussed opposition among this same elite to the formation of a new political party by Sa'id, and to the alleged attempt by Abdelaziz in 2008 to create for Sa'id a position as vice president. She also reported that most French companies already doing business in Algeria have decided to accept rather than to resist the new trade restricting regulations. Finally, she speculated that Algeria may be offering some form of support to Moroccan activist Aminatou Haidar. END SUMMARY.

SECRETIVE AND DISCRETE

12. (S/NF) MFA Algeria Desk Officer Anne-Claire Legendre said the shroud of secrecy enveloping President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has stymied French attempts to understand his succession plans. The Bouteflika brothers have proved remarkably successful at limiting public access to information about both their private lives and their political collaboration, Legendre observed. As a result of the fiercely guarded secrecy in which the Bouteflikas operate, Legendre said the GOF has limited information about the health of either brother, though she remarked that Abdelaziz seems to maintain a regular, vigorous schedule. She described the absence of reporting on the Bouteflikas as particularly noteworthy when contrasted to the often vehement criticisms of the Algerian political system launched by journalists inside and outside the country. She noted that Abdelaziz has never even been photographed with a woman. It seems, she argued, Algerian journalists have adopted a form of "self-censorship" in refraining from writing about "the Bouteflika clan."

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR CONCEALING SUCCESSION PLANS

13. (S/NF) In addition to their strong preference for secrecy and discretion, the Bouteflika brothers may have another motivation for concealing their succession plans: a desire to build support among Algeria's elite, who remain suspicious of any attempts to "personalize" the presidency, according to Legendre. She said Algerians perceive their country as possessing a revolutionary rather than a dynastic inheritance -- a "cult of personality" approach to the presidency is alien to the Algerian political tradition, Legendre argued. In this regard, she said, Algerians perceive themselves as somehow superior to their North African neighbors, including Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and even Egypt, whose leaders all seem determined to ensure a relative becomes the next head of state. Thus when Abdelaziz pushed Parliament to reform the constitution in November 2008 in order to enable him to run for a third term, many Algerians were "shocked" at what Legendre said they perceived as the "personalization" of the presidency.

SA'ID'S FIRST PUBLIC ROLE - CAMPAIGN MANAGER

14. (S/NF) Over the course of the past five years, Sa'id Bouteflika has apparently begun to adopt an increasingly significant role in Algerian political life, Legendre argued. She claimed he played a prominent role, albeit behind the scenes, as "campaign manager" in Abdelaziz' 2004 presidential

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election campaign. In the 2008 campaign, she said, Sa'id returned to this role, but this time he was "out in front" rather than in the background. This development indicated to the French, Legendre reported, that Sa'id had begun to play a more influential political role. Nonetheless, he has still never expressed himself in public; he remains "truly a man of shadows," she observed wryly.

SA'ID AND THE RND

15. (S/NF) As campaign manager, Sa'id worked closely with leaders of the National Rally for Democracy (RND), Legendre reported. She described the group with which he collaborated as "secular technocrats and businessmen." This close association may indicate something about Sa'id's world view, Legendre asserted, though she qualified that observation by noting that Sa'id ran a campaign for Abdelaziz which included support for a general amnesty -- a move favorable to the Islamists, not the secularists, in Legendre's interpretation.

RUMORS OF SA'ID LAUNCHING A NEW POLITICAL PARTY

16. (S/NF) Legendre said she does not know whether Sa'id will eventually launch a new political party, but she speculated as to who might have orchestrated rumors about this possibility. It could be Sa'id himself, she said, or his brother, in which case the Bouteflikas may be seeking to float a "trial balloon" to gauge public reaction. A strong negative reaction might persuade Abdelaziz to abandon the idea, Legendre ventured, though she did not judge the public reaction so far as particularly strong in one direction or the other. She did describe, however, the reaction of the leaders of the two largest political parties -- the National Liberation Front and the National Rally for Democracy -- as "defensive." They likely perceive this new party as a threat, she speculated.

OPPOSITION TO A POSSIBLE NEW PARTY

¶17. (S/NF) Members of the establishment opposed to the advent of a new party could also be publicizing Sa'id's alleged plans, according to Legendre. These opponents could come from either of the two largest political parties, or from among leaders of the military or intelligence services. They may seek to publicize Sa'id's possible political party in order to engender a negative reaction to it, thus demonstrating to both brothers that they will face stiff opposition if they proceed to establish a new party.

SA'ID FOR VICE PRESIDENT?

¶18. (S/NF) Legendre also emphasized the importance of the push to create the position of vice president during the 2008 constitutional reform process, an effort led by Abdelaziz. This move ultimately failed, possibly, Legendre posited, because Sa'id appeared to be a leading candidate. Legendre said she believes the failure to create this position may have indicated that leaders of the military or intelligence services did not want Sa'id in this high-level position, where he could develop into Abdelaziz' de facto successor. Legendre also raised the possibility that Abdelaziz could try again, during his third term, to pass a constitutional amendment establishing the role of vice president.

HE AIN'T HEAVY - HE'S MY (MUCH OLDER) BROTHER

¶10. (S/NF) Legendre said the GOF considers it significant that Sa'id grew up in a different generation than did his older brother. She estimated that about 20 years separate them, placing Sa'id in his 50s (she estimated that he is 52). The revolutionary period, the regional crises of the 1970s, and the social upheaval of the 1980s profoundly shaped Abdelaziz' world view, she said. Sa'id may have had different formative influences, though Legendre did not speculate as to what those might be.

FRENCH COMPANIES RESIGNED TO NEW RESTRICTIONS

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¶11. (S/NF) As to the new restrictions on foreign trade and investment in Algeria, she reported that most French companies already doing business in Algeria have decided to accept rather than to resist the new regulations. Although she has not yet seen the actual statistics, she conjectured that many small- and medium-sized French enterprises who might have invested in Algeria now avoid it instead. The GOF itself is exasperated -- "how do you persuade the Algerians that their decisions are based on obsolete thinking?," she ruminated. She blames the paranoia of Abdelaziz for the advent of this trade restricting legislation: he fears indebtedness could lead Algeria back to the ruinous riots of ¶1988.

ALGERIAN SUPPORT FOR AMINATOU HAIDAR?

¶12. (S/NF) Legendre speculated that the Government of Algeria may be offering support to Moroccan activist Aminatou Haidar, possibly logistically or financially, since the Algerians certainly back her call for independence for the people of the Western Sahara. She said the GOF does not have concrete evidence or information about what this support might entail.

COMMENT

¶13. (S/NF) Although Legendre is one of post's reliable and respected contacts in the French MFA, we have no means of independently verifying her analysis.
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